

MUNOFS VI Research Report

Forum: Special Conference

Issue: Equitable sharing of water resources along the common systems of the Mekong River

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Introduction

The Mekong River is the 12th longest river in the world, stretching to 4,350km. Its source is the Qinghai Province of China near the shared border with Tibet. The Mekong River flows down to the South China Sea, passing through the Yunnan Province of China. This river is a major source of water for the South-east Asian countries that it passes through which are China, Burma (Myanmar), Laos, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam. This rivers source of water is used for irrigation, fishing, power generation, transportation and industrial and domestic supply of water.



The six aforementioned countries currently use the river. However, some development has been attempted, this is one of the least developed rivers in the world because of the aggression between the 6 riparians of the Mekong River. The United Nations Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East (ECAFE) was established in 1947 to deal with the development of Southeast Asia. The ECAFE study of 1952 involving the lower-based 4 riparians (Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam) showed that the Mekong River was ideal for hydroelectric and irrigation development. In 1954, the Geneva Accords was

signed which allowed this idea to be carried forth with the “ending” of hostilities.

The US Bureau of Reclamation researched and prepared the development of the lower basin in 1955-1956. It pointed out that immense cooperation was needed and the 4 lower-based riparians agreed and programs were offered as well.

In order for cooperation and chaos to be avoided, an international body was created which may be made permanent in order to maintain cooperation at the Mekong Basin. When the report was appointed at the ECARE meeting in Bangkok in March 1957, it was not accepted by the 4 riparian states but was called for further study.

Over time, problems became worse and worse as there were problems among the riparian states because of their different needs. There are conflicts amongst the water-equipped upstream riparians and water-deprived downstream riparians. China and Myanmar, the uppermost riparians, have not involved themselves with plans which makes it even more difficult for decisions to be made as their consultation is necessary. Their needs are satisfied and hence, see no need in involving themselves in the downstream riparians. Finally, the involved countries of this issue never had an interest to solve their problems and were brought together by the United Nations – a third party. This makes it more difficult because the UN does not see any motivation and hence, find it difficult to bring the countries together as they may not know where to start.

Key Terms Defined

River: “A large natural stream of water flowing in a channel to the sea, a lake, or another stream” (<http://www.thefreedictionary.com/river>).

Qinghai Province: “A province of northwest-central China. Both the largest and least populated of China's provinces, its northern border is the Qilian Shan. Xining is the capital. Population: 4,820,000” (<http://www.thefreedictionary.com/Qinghai+Province>).



South China Sea: “An arm of the western Pacific Ocean bounded by southeast China, Taiwan, the Philippines, Borneo, and Vietnam” (<http://www.thefreedictionary.com/South+China+Sea>).



Yunnan Province: “A province of southwest China consisting mainly of a plateau broken in the southeast by the Red and Black river with mountains in the west, rising over 5,500m with large deposits of tin, lead, zinc and coal. Capital: Kunming. Pop: 43,760,000. Area: 436,200 sq. km” (<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/yunnan>).



Riparian: “relating to or living or located on the bank of a natural watercourse (as a river) or sometimes of a lake or a tidewater” (<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/riparian>).

Geneva Accords: “The Geneva Accords of 1954 were designed to secure peace in Vietnam but would eventually contribute to war” (<http://alphahistory.com/vietnam/geneva-accords-of-1954/>) .

US Bureau of Reclamation: “Formerly the United States Reclamation Service, is a federal agency under the U.S. Department of the Interior which oversees water resource management, specifically as it applies to the oversight and operation of the diversion, delivery, and storage projects that it has built” (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/US_Bureau_of_Reclamation).

General Overview of the Topic

The Mekong River is an essential river for the riparian states as a source of water for many daily uses such as transportation and fishing. This river has helped the 6 riparian states as a source of water, which is a major necessity for all people. It flows through these 6 nations making it the 12th longest river in the world. This river is shared among all these 6 nations and as a result, over the years, has caused hostility among them over the usage of the river. This is one of the least developed rivers. The hostility started before 1947, when the UN intervened, as a result of uncooperative behavior.

The problem of equitable sharing of the water supply of the Mekong River systems has increased over time as a result of uncooperative behavior and a disinterested attitude. In March 1957, during the ECAFE meeting, the 4 lower-located riparian states were present and an agreement was arranged but their disinterested attitude resulted in a delay of the decision which showed a careless approach towards the issue. In addition, the 2 upper – located riparian states were not even present and did not take part in any of this decision-making process which made it even more difficult for ECAFE. This key problem

among the states made it very difficult to resolve the enmity among these nations.

This major set of events built up over time which made it even more difficult for the UN to resolve any of the problems. Over time, as the different nations' needs changed, they started to differ greatly from those of the other nations. This made it even more difficult for each nation to understand the need of the other. This increased the antagonism amongst the 6 nations making the UN's job even more difficult. This was the result of not solving and coming to a decision on the issue earlier in 1957.

Major Parties Involved and Their Views

China

China is one of the two upper riparian states and took no interest in cooperating with the other riparian states. China has played almost no part in the development of the Mekong River until very recently when projects have been started upon the river. The development is the creation of 11 hydropower dams. However countries argue differently, China believes that they are located along the upper area of the Mekong River and that they should be able to use the river freely for their own benefits. These benefits include a continuous supply of electricity and power as well as the fact that the dams are not producing greenhouse gases.

Burma (Myanmar)

Myanmar is the other upper riparian and did not take much of an interest on the disputes along the Mekong River just like China. However, they are participating more now. China's hydropower dams are causing problems for Myanmar as well. This would not seem so because they both are upper riparian states but this is not the case. The dams are causing fishing and rice growing problems for the communities of Myanmar. This is because the dams would hinder the nutrient-rich sediment flow which makes rice growing difficult and stops fish.

Laos

Laos is the first lower riparian state and has been actively involved in the decisions regarding the disputes along the Mekong River. The sharing of the water is a problem for the communities of Laos because have created fishery problems and changing water levels for the communities along the Thai-Laos border. This makes it most difficult for Laos especially because this is the first lower riparian state which the Mekong River flows through and hence creates problems with greater impact. Furthermore, Laos and Thailand have a shared border which the river flows through. This creates sharing difficult because the two countries use the water from a close range. This increases disputes in case a

shortage of water was to arise.

Thailand

Thailand is the second lower riparian state and has been greatly affected with the disputes along the Mekong River. This is because of the hydropower dams in China which created the same problems that Laos has. This is that there are fish shortages and rising sea levels along the Thai-Laos border. This disrupts the daily usage of the river by the Thai communities along the Mekong River. This makes them feel that they do not receive enough resources from the river that they should be creating a tension from Thailand. The dams would remove 30% of the protein that would otherwise reach. Finally, the Thai-Laos border is a large stretch through which the Mekong flows through. This increases the chance of dispute as the two countries use the river from a great amount of the same area.

Cambodia

Cambodia is one of the lower riparian states and is also greatly affected because the Mekong River flows through this after flowing through 4 other nations. This makes it difficult for the fish and nutrients to reach because of China's dams and the usage from the other countries. This includes 30% of protein that should reach Cambodia but would not as a result of the China dams. This does not give equitable sharing of the river and its resources like should be done. China's removal of dams would greatly suppress this issue.

Vietnam

Vietnam is the final riparian state which the Mekong River flows through. They would be affected as many of the resources would not be reaching as they are the final riparian. This is not equitable sharing and is not fair for Vietnam.

Timeline of events

1947 - United Nations Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East (ECAFE) is established to aid with the growth of Southeast Asia

1954 – Hostility is ended with the signing of the Geneva Accords

1955-56 – US Bureau of Reclamation forces the cooperation of the 4 lower riparian states – Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam – and they agree

September 1957 – 4 lower riparian states create and sign the “Committee for Coordination of

Investigations of the Lower Mekong” making the Mekong Committee legal

1965 – Laos and Thailand sign a pact about a project of power generation on Nam Ngum River (Mekong branch in Laos). Thailand buys extra power in exchange for foreign capital. Hostility continued

1975 – Joint Declaration on Principles signed for “reasonable and equitable use” of the Mekong River

1978 – Mekong Committee becomes “Interim Mekong Committee” with three members as Cambodia loses its representative

1991 – Cambodia rejoins as a member and Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS) Cooperation Program commences for the development of the area

1995 – Cooperation for the Sustainable Development of the Mekong River Basin signed by Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam for development, utilization, conservation and management of the Basin while urging Myanmar and China (2 upstream riparian states) to cooperate

UN involvement, relevant resolutions, Treaties and Events

September 1957 – The United Nations Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East (ECAFE) was created in 1947 and was a big success. It was widely accepted by the lower riparian states. They created the Coordination Committee which looked through all the information to create the Mekong Committee. This consisted of the 4 lower riparian states and had constant support from the UN. This committee was signed on September 17.

1995 – The Mekong Committee which was created in 1957 under ECAFE, brought the 4 lower riparian states together to sign the Cooperation for the Sustainable Development of the Mekong River Basin. This helped to solve some of the problems such as less hostility but also brought the upper 2 riparian states to cooperate.

United Nations Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East (ECAFE) - It is now located in Bangkok and Thailand. It is one of the five regional commissions of the United Nations Economic and Social Council. It was established in 1947 and is now the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP). It is used to encourage economic cooperation among its member states.

Possible Solutions

The possible solutions that can be used to solve this issue of the equitable sharing of water resources along the Mekong River are:

1. Organize an annual meeting for the 6 riparian states. This would help to resolve any issues between the states. Contact would be encouraged throughout the year to encourage to resolve any short term disputes however, annual meetings would be necessary in order to have an arbitrate to help in any future disputes.
2. Create a treaty amongst the 6 riparian states for the equitable sharing of the resources of the Mekong River. China is creating dams which is affecting the other countries. The riparian states could sign a treaty to allow China to create dams but in moderation over long periods in return for electricity and the return of nutrients to the other riparian states over time.
3. Create a committee with representatives in each of the 6 riparian states to analyze the usage of the water resources along the river. This helps to create equity among the usage of the water resources.
4. Utilize a system where water usage is limited to a certain extent and the separate committee will charge for any overuse.

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